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New Jersey State Parole Board Budget Testimony FY2021 Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee

*Samuel J. Plumeri, Jr., Chairman
September 10, 2020*

Thank you, Chairman Sarlo, Vice Chair Cunningham, and members of this committee for offering me the chance to discuss the critical nature of the State Parole Board, our achievements, and where we are headed in the short and long-term future.

As you are already aware, the New Jersey State Parole Board is committed to promoting public safety and fostering the successful rehabilitation of offenders by implementing policies that result in effective case management for more than 16,000 offenders who are under agency supervision.

Our accomplishments would not be possible without the professionalism, dedication, and passion on the part of the nearly 600 men and women of this agency who perform their duties efficiently and effectively. In addition to State Parole Board personnel, favorable partnerships help spur our success as we continue to engage with numerous local, state, and federal law enforcement entities, as well as other government agencies and community and faith-based organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinary impact on life across the globe. The virus has altered our lives and its effects will continue to be far-reaching and provide more challenges and change. Along with the coronavirus, 2020 has required that the State Parole Board quickly adapt to the changing landscape within our operations. *Earn Your Way Out, Executive Order Number 124, and Juvenile Justice legislation* are examples that are keeping the State Parole Board extremely active.

On March 9th, Governor Murphy issued a public health emergency declaration. Following this directive, Executive Order Number 124 was soon issued—mandating the creation of a committee comprised of representatives from the Department of Corrections and the State Parole Board, which would jointly determine eligibility for the statutory furlough of certain non-violent inmates fitting various criteria. The committee was also charged with the task of expediting consideration for parole-eligible individuals meeting the same criteria.

Executive Order Number 124 significantly affected State Parole Board operations and the agency appropriately met all the challenges presented. The members of the Board explicitly understood the gravity of their task. Facing an increased arrival of cases and hearings, they continued to meet their mission by providing competent and judicious release decisions in an expeditious manner. And, in doing so, were not only aided by video teleconferencing but made on-site visits to the prisons. Additionally, the Board's decisions were carefully rendered in adherence to Governor Murphy's directive.

This past January, Governor Murphy signed the *Earn Your Way Out* legislation into law, which begins in February 2021. Since that time, the State Parole Board has been diligently preparing for the influx of new parolees. *Earn Your Way Out* requires that certain inmates convicted of nonviolent offenses be released on parole after a review by a hearing officer and certification for release by a member of our agency. Additionally, the law mandates that the Department of Corrections and the State Parole Board coordinate reentry preparation efforts and other rehabilitative services for inmates within State correctional facilities. The departments must engage inmates to develop and implement their individualized, comprehensive reentry plans.

The State Parole Board firmly believes that we best achieve our public safety and positive reentry missions by introducing beneficial change in the lives of released offenders rather than simply revoking their parole and sending them back to prison through a revolving door of criminal justice. Our vision and our accomplishments are reflected in the positive backstories about the successes of numerous individuals under parole supervision.

Late last year, the State Parole Board helped support an important and very worthwhile program led by the New Jersey State Library that will have deep implications in the area of offender reentry. *Fresh Start at Your Library* is a statewide library reentry program that is focused on reconnecting returning citizens with their communities at their public libraries. This program exists through a federal grant from the *Institute of Museum and Library Services*. Licensed social workers at libraries in Newark, Trenton, Paterson, Atlantic City, Cumberland County, and Long Branch are helping formerly incarcerated individuals begin their journey by assisting them in developing personalized plans helping them identify their immediate needs and create a personal strategy tailored to their own individual needs.

For several years, New Jersey, in particular the State Parole Board, has been recognized by several nationally recognized criminal justice and nonpartisan research centers such as, *The Sentencing Project*, *Pew Research Center*, *Brennan Center for Justice* and the *Justice Center of the Council of State Governments* as a national leader for our consistently low recidivism rate and significant reductions in parole revocations that would have resulted in re-incarceration— all while uniform crime rates continued to decline in New Jersey.

I have previously spoken to this committee about an achievement that the State Parole Board garnered in May 2013, when we received our initial accreditation as a law enforcement agency through the *New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police*. We achieved our first re-accreditation in March of 2017 and then again on June 11, 2020. Having our reevaluation conducted in April presented some unique challenges given the status of the pandemic during that time period. New measures were taken to complete the reaccreditation requirements for the evaluation period in a much more efficient manner. Using technology on hand, video recordings were provided as proofs for specific standards in lieu of in-person inspections. Recordings were provided of our two-way radio capabilities, firearms safes, secured file rooms, just to name a few. This significant law enforcement endorsement recognizes the State Parole Board's compliance with 105 "best practice" standards—resulting in greater accountability, reduced risk and liability exposure, stronger defense against civil lawsuits, and better augmentation of community advocacy programs. It will also continue to provide increased confidence in the agency's ability to operate efficiently, and the ability to respond to a variety of community needs. I am proud of all of the State Parole Board employees and thankful for the opportunity to work with such admirable professionals. I am equally

proud of our affiliation with the *New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police* and being recognized by them for our expertise, knowledge, and many achievements in the field of law enforcement.

In September of 2017, the State Parole Board was awarded a grant in the amount of \$600,000 under the auspices of the *United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, and Bureau of Justice Assistance* to develop a *Swift, Certain and Fair* supervision program. This program assists individuals who are currently under parole supervision, have a history of opioid use, and are significantly at risk for an overdose.

Working closely with our partners—*RWJ Barnabas Health Institute for Prevention and Recovery*, and the New Jersey Reentry Corporation—offenders from Monmouth and Ocean counties, which have seen some of the highest number of opioid-related deaths in the state, are pointed towards targeted services that will help divert them from committing a crime, having their parole revoked, and returning to prison.

In closing, let me reiterate that the New Jersey State Parole Board will continue to achieve the aforementioned missions—helping to ensure public safety and work to create meaningful reentry opportunities for offenders returning to our communities. We will also continue to collaborate with our variety of partners at the federal, state, and local levels and continue to eagerly maximize the use of technology, implementing evidence-based best practices in the field of community supervision. All of these time-honored and innovative efforts seek to improve the quality of community-based programs to provide every available opportunity for successful offender reintegration.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome any questions at this time.